

The Problem of Student Disengagement: Struggle, Escapism and Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy

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Volume 26, Number 1, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071421ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071421ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Yacek, D. & Jonas, M. (2019). The Problem of Student Disengagement: Struggle, Escapism and Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 26(1), 64–87. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071421ar>

Article abstract

Numerous studies have shown that secondary and college students are increasingly apathetic and disengaged from their schooling. The problem of student disengagement is not confined to under-represented socioeconomic groups; it is found across the country—in cities, suburbs, and rural communities; in wealthy schools and poor schools; in public schools and charter schools; in majority white schools and those composed largely of students of color. In this essay, we argue that Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* contains crucial pedagogical and conceptual resources for responding to this widespread problem. The conception of "Dionysian pessimism" Nietzsche advances in this early work and its relationship to the escapist, "Alexandrianism" he observes in late 19th century German education are relevant to the contemporary problem of student disengagement, we argue, because they address head on the reality of struggle in students' academic experiences and can potentially explain the disengagement they experience when they fail to acknowledge, accept and even embrace the struggle of education. When struggle is seen as something to be avoided and endured only for the sake of later academic and career success, as it often is, Nietzsche argues that apathy, disengagement and even resentment can result. Thus, while Nietzsche's diagnosis is rooted in an analysis of his own culture and time, this essay hopes to show that it has the potential to speak to important practical issues in contemporary education.

The Problem of Student Disengagement: Struggle, Escapism and Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy

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Numerous studies have shown that secondary and college students are increasingly apathetic and disengaged from their schooling. The problem of student disengagement is not confined to under-represented socioeconomic groups; it is found across the country: in cities, suburbs, and rural communities; in wealthy schools and poor schools; in public schools and charter schools; in majority white schools and those composed largely of students of color. In this essay, we argue that Friedrich Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy contains crucial pedagogical and conceptual resources for responding to this widespread problem. In particular, the conception of "Dionysian pessimism" Nietzsche advances in this early work and its relationship to the escapist, "Alexandrianism" he observes in late 19th century German education are relevant to the contemporary problem of student disengagement because they address head on the reality of struggle in students' academic experiences and can potentially explain the disengagement they experience when they fail to acknowledge, accept and even embrace the struggle of education. When struggle is seen as something to be avoided and endured only for the sake of later academic and career success, as it often is, Nietzsche argues that apathy, disengagement, and even resentment can result. Thus, while Nietzsche's diagnosis is rooted in an analysis of his own culture and time, this essay hopes to show that it has the potential to speak to important practical issues in contemporary education.

Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that secondary and college students are increasingly apathetic and disengaged from their schooling (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; OECD, 2012; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996; Trout, 1997). This observation will come as little surprise to students, teachers, administrators, and parents who are confronted with this reality every day. Indeed, many of us were apathetic students ourselves, and even those of us who achieved at high levels often merely went through the motions without genuine engagement. Disengagement is not confined to under-represented socioeconomic groups; it is found across the country in cities, suburbs, and rural communities; in wealthy schools and poor schools; in

public schools and charter schools; in majority white schools and those composed largely of students of color (Klem & Connell, 2004; Steinberg et al., 1996).

Unfortunately, re-engaging students in the educational process is no straightforward task. In a set of classic studies of American high schools in the 1980's,Sizer (1985) and Sedlak et al. (1986) observed that the dizzying number of academic, administrative, and social demands on public schoolteachers undermine their ability to meet students' academic needs. For Sizer (1985), the situation forces teachers to compromise between their academic and non-academic roles (p. 68), while for Sedlak et al., (1986) this compromise ultimately leads to an implicit "bargain", whereby teachers agree to minimize students' workload and reduce its difficulty if students agree to minimize troublesome behaviors that upset smooth classroom operation. The bargain consists of a "tacit conspiracy to avoid sustained, rigorous, demanding, academic inquiry" in public and private schools (Sedlak et al., 1986, p. 6). Both teachers and students implicitly support this bargain, Sedlak et al. argue, as it reduces their respective difficulties and struggles. On the one hand, teachers too often avoid the complex and laborious task of connecting subject matter to intrinsic sources of motivation in their students; on the other, students learn to put forth just enough effort to ensure they get the grades they need to advance to the next rung of the educational ladder.¹ For this reason, Sedlak et al. argue that educational reforms, especially those tied to the introduction of "high standards," have failed and will continue to fail until the issue of the bargain is addressed. Furthermore, they assert that even improvements in teacher education will not result in higher student achievement or more engagement. Instead, renegotiating the bargain is the critical first step to re-engaging students: "[U]nless a new bargain between educators and students is struck, the implicit learning contract in our nation's schools will not change and neither will our chance to achieve academic excellence for *all* our students" (Sedlak et al, 1986, p. xi).

Though both the Sizer and Sedlak studies were published in the 1980s, not much has changed in American colleges and public schools in this regard. Our lecture halls and classrooms remain too often places of student disengagement and teacher capitulation. A more recent study of disengagement in public schools observes that "[b]y high school as many as 40% to 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school—urban, suburban, and rural—not counting those who already dropped out" (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 262). Similarly, Harward (2008) remarks that "professors and students" too often "mutually agree to a 'if you don't bother me, I won't bother you' compact," one that leads to the disengagement and avoidance of "rigorous study" that has become widespread among college students (n. p.). The 2012 PISA study of student engagement shows that while "93% of students believe that trying hard at school is important and only 12% believe that school has been a waste of time[,] . . . many students are not engaged with school; they report being dissatisfied with school, not feeling in control of their ability to acquire knowledge, and not feeling capable of performing at high levels" (OECD, 2012, p. 32). As a rough indicator of the problem in the United States, the PISA study found that 30% of students "arrived late for school up to five times or more in the two weeks prior to the PISA test," placing them at the 20th rank among other countries (OECD, 2012, p. 34).² In light of these worrying results,

¹ Both parties adopt this academic bargain for a variety of reasons -- personal, institutional and socio-economic. To point out the existence of the bargain is not to indict either teachers or students for the current state of affairs. Rather, it is meant as a starting point for rethinking the implicit situational logic that governs their interactions even when both have good intentions.

² The way the 2012 PISA study defines and measures student engagement is not without its problems. PISA uses four indicators to do so: Lack of Punctuality, Absenteeism, Sense of Belonging, Attitudes Towards School. While the first two may suggest *dis*engagement from school, they are hardly helpful for determining the presence of true

Skinner & Pitzer (2012) suggest the climate of educational disengagement, though it is a complex and challenging problem to resolve, is one of the most important issues for educators and researchers to address:

For many schools and teachers, the creation and continual renegotiation of an intrinsically motivating curriculum and a supportive classroom climate may appear to require too much work and coordination among teachers, and to produce too uncertain a path to the achievement test scores upon which evaluations and accountability of teachers and schools are now based. However, the downward spirals of student and teacher engagement, the draining away of students' intrinsic motivation, and the rates of student dropout and teacher burnout, are all reminders of the costs associated with the current situation. (p. 37)

The persistent challenge of student disengagement thus raises an important question. How might teachers and students re-negotiate the “bargain” that governs their relations so that high academic standards can be upheld while students are given the resources and develop the agency they need to meet those standards?

To answer this question, we look to a perhaps unlikely source for educational inspiration and to an even more unlikely idea: Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of “Dionysian pessimism” advanced in his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. While research on Nietzsche in education has steadily increased in the last several years after decades of relative neglect, there is still much work to be done on this undeniably important and enigmatic figure.³ This is especially so concerning *The Birth of Tragedy*, one of his most widely read and most influential books outside of education. Of the articles published in the last thirty years on Nietzsche's educational thought, none offer a thorough treatment of *The Birth of Tragedy*; indeed, very few mention the text at all.⁴ This is not altogether surprising as the book was written very early in

psychological engagement in the learning process. The latter two indicators are proxies at best for student engagement; at worst, they are irrelevant. For example, students may feel a sense of belonging because they are connected with a group of students that do not care about school. Studies with a qualitative, observational component are likely more suited for studying such phenomena, in our view.

³ Nietzsche's impact on other fields has been so dramatic that it seemed only a matter of time before Anglo-American educational theorists began to recognize his importance for education as well. Since 2001, well over a dozen articles have been written on Nietzsche in the major Anglo-American philosophy of education journals as well as a bound collection of essays. While most interpreters consider Nietzsche to be useful for philosophical reflection on contemporary educational concerns—e.g. Bingham (2001; 2005; 2007), Fennell (2005), Fitzsimons (2007), Gregory (2001), Irwin (2003), Jonas (2009, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), Jonas & Nakazawa (2008), Jonas & Yacek (2018), Joosten (2015), Marshall (2001), Mintz (2004), Ramaekers (2001), Sassone (2004), Steel (2014), Stolz (2017), Tubbs (2005), Yacek (2014a, 2014b)—others have argued that Nietzsche's philosophical legacy is incompatible with the aims and practices of democratic education—e.g. Allen (2017), Aviram (1991), Jenkins (1982), Johnston (2001), Rosenow (1973, 1989). As we hope the show in determining the contemporary educational “relevance” of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, we believe that the former group has this right. For an extended defense of the compatibility of Nietzsche's political philosophy with the aims of democratic education, as well as a repudiation of the supposed “elitism” of Nietzsche's politics, see Jonas & Yacek (2018).

⁴ There are two notable exceptions to this rule. The first is Sean Steel's (2014) recent conception of a “Dionysian education” derived from Nietzsche's discussion of the “Dionysian” in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Steel takes Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian as a point of departure for developing an educational program centered around the ideas of myth, “cultus”, leisure, and “the death or dissolution of the mortal ego-self”. Another exception is Henrietta Joosten (2013), who similarly looks to the Dionysian and Apollinian categories in *The Birth of Tragedy* for inspiration on how to conceive of professional education which better prepares practitioners to grapple with uncertainty in their respective contexts of decision-making. Although both Steel and Joosten are right to see the *Birth of Tragedy* as

Nietzsche's career and only references education a few times. Nevertheless, what it has to say about education is important, both for the historian of educational thought and for the educational practitioner. Nietzsche's conception of "Dionysian pessimism" and its relationship to the escapist, "Alexandrian" culture he observes in late 19th century German society is relevant to the contemporary educator because it addresses head on the reality of struggle in students' academic experiences and can potentially explain the disengagement they experience when they fail to acknowledge, accept, and even embrace the struggle of education. When struggle is seen as something to be endured only for the sake of later academic and career success, as the "bargain" culture of public schools suggests, Nietzsche argues that apathy, disengagement, and even resentment can result. Thus, while Nietzsche's diagnosis is rooted in an analysis of his own culture and time, it has the potential to speak to important practical issues in contemporary education.

In order to demonstrate the relevance and educational promise of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, the argument of this essay proceeds as follows. The first section aims to reconstruct Nietzsche's conception of Dionysian pessimism. This task proves to be a significant exegetical challenge, both because Nietzsche implicitly embeds his conception of pessimism in his account of the rise of "Socratic optimism" in Greek antiquity and because his discussion often vacillates between characteristically Schopenhauerian and uniquely Nietzschean locutions. Thus we first recount Nietzsche's famous account of the progression, and eventual fall, of Greek cultural life and the role Nietzsche attributes to "Socratic optimism" in this decline. Next, we attempt to disaggregate Nietzsche's Dionysian conception of pessimism from Schopenhauerian pessimism with the help of his self-critique in the later 1886 preface. With his conception of Dionysian pessimism firmly in place, we then turn to Nietzsche's cultural critique in *The Birth of Tragedy*. According to Nietzsche, Socratic optimism—or "Alexandrianism" as he calls it—is omnipresent in contemporary culture, and the task of overcoming it, for which he spiritedly argues in the book, is at root an educational project. In the final section, we attempt to draw out the "promise" of Nietzsche's conception of pessimism for contemporary education. Here we argue that this conception is in line with some important work that has been done recently in educational psychology, particularly on the power of "mastery motivation" for meeting the problem of student disengagement. Beyond this, we show that Nietzsche's educational thought in *The Birth of Tragedy* would encourage schools to adopt a comprehensive pedagogical program for meeting the problem of student disengagement, one involving the cultivation of "self-overcoming" in both students and teachers.

Nietzsche's Conception of "Dionysian Pessimism"

Although *The Birth of Tragedy* is purportedly a work of philological scholarship advancing a theory of Greek cultural development, the young Nietzsche's project in *The Birth of Tragedy* expands well beyond the confines of antiquarian historical inquiry. Nietzsche hoped to take on the scourge of "Socratism" he

a source of insight for contemporary education, the main problem with their treatments, and in fact in each of the previous engagements with *The Birth of Tragedy* in the philosophy of education journals, is that they fixate on the categories of the Apollinian and Dionysian in abstraction from Nietzsche's main theses in *The Birth of Tragedy*. As we demonstrate below, Nietzsche advances a conception of "life-affirming pessimism" in this early work that has significant and previously unappreciated consequences for contemporary education. This conception of pessimism helps us to understand and potentially counteract the twin problems of disengagement and escapism that plague contemporary schools.

observed in late 19th century German society with this polemical treatise. Following an account of the downfall of Greek cultural life at the hands of Socrates and a critique of the philosopher's continued influence in 19th century German intellectual life, *The Birth of Tragedy* offers a plea to reinvigorate the culture of "Attic tragedy", the last of the pre-Socratic aesthetic stages that Nietzsche determines in the progress of Greek antiquity. At the time of its first publication (1872), Nietzsche saw hope in Wagnerian music drama as the revolutionary catalyst to make the renewal of Attic culture possible; references are made throughout the book to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and several other of his works are cited as indications of an "impending rebirth of Hellenic Antiquity" (BT 20, p. 97).⁵ Yet the older Nietzsche—ruining some of the book's stylistic shortcomings, its general lack of "a will to logical cleanliness" (BT P:3), and its naïve Wagnerian enthusiasm in a preface written fourteen years later—sought to call the reader's attention to somewhat different themes in the book. The importance of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the older Nietzsche paradoxically maintains, is its hearkening back to a positive, constructive, and robust notion of *pessimism* which the Greeks supposedly espoused. Nietzsche, in fact, changes the subtitle of the 1886 edition from "Out of the Spirit of Music" to "Or Hellenism and Pessimism".

That the older Nietzsche cites the concept of pessimism as an important theme in *The Birth of Tragedy* may seem unsurprising, as Schopenhauer was a major influence on Nietzsche's intellectual life at the time and his philosophical vision saturates the work. However, in the later 1886 preface, Nietzsche surprisingly argues that the brand of pessimism he hopes his readers take away from the book is one that is directly *opposed* to Schopenhauerian pessimism. So what exactly is the difference between Schopenhauerian pessimism and the pessimism Nietzsche claims to advance in *The Birth of Tragedy*? Answering this question is far from straightforward. In particular, there are two serious exegetical barriers that stand in the way of determining the distinctive features of Nietzsche's conception of pessimism. First, Nietzsche never explicitly defines the conception of pessimism that apparently informs this early work, nor does he use the term in a systematic way to describe what he values among the Attic Greeks.⁶ Instead, his main target in the book is the brand of "Socratic optimism" that he claims emerged in the late Attic period of Greek tragedy, only alluding to an alternative conception of pessimism in his polemical engagement with this historical development. Second, and even more problematically, Schopenhauer's philosophical influence in the book colors even those passages in which the later Nietzsche sees his unique conception of "Dionysian pessimism" developing. Determining Nietzsche's conception of pessimism in *The Birth of Tragedy* thus requires disaggregating these two philosophical positions particularly within passages in which they are conflated. We shall take up each of these tasks in turn below.

The Birth of Socratic Optimism: Socrates contra Attic Tragedy

What, then, is the nature of this Socratic optimism which Nietzsche takes to be the death knell of ancient Greek aesthetic culture and a plague to late 19th century German life? To answer this question, we should first consider his account of Greek cultural development. Nietzsche discerns four notable

⁵ For ease of reference, we will refer to Nietzsche's works using the standard abbreviations employed in scholarship on Nietzsche: BT, *The Birth of Tragedy*; D, *Daybreak*; EH, *Ecce Homo*; GM, *On the Genealogy of Morals*; GS, *The Gay Science*; HH, *Human, All Too Human*; NCW, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*; SE, *Schopenhauer as Educator*; Z, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

⁶ The closest we come to an explicit, positive usage can be found in a discussion of the "profound and pessimistic worldview" whose "elements" can all be found in the early stages of Greek tragic development in section 10.

stages in development of Greek cultural life, each of which can be characterized by the particular type of interaction between the “Dionysian” and “Apollinian” drives that occurs there (BT 2, p. 19).⁷ According to Nietzsche, these drives grow out of two separate realms of experience which are essential to creative expression, and indeed to human life in general. While the Apollinian drive emerges from the realm of *dream*, the Dionysian corresponds to the realm of intoxication, or *Rausch*. For Nietzsche, imagery and semblance are central to the dream experience, while the intoxication experience is defined by the transcendence of personal and interpersonal boundaries and a sense of having experienced the “basic primordial unity” of reality (BT 1, p. 18).⁸ Importantly, the opposition between the Dionysian and Apollinian is not a completely “balanced” one from a metaphysical point of view. Unlike strictly Apollinian art, the forms of expression inspired by the Dionysian drive reveal a special kind of “Dionysiac wisdom” (BT 16, p. 80) which grasps the “true essence of things”: namely, the ephemerality of human life and the dissolution of individuality that eventually befalls each one of us. In the first stage of Greek cultural development, the Apollinian and Dionysian are both present in the culture, but they exist in wholly separate aesthetic pursuits. While the folk religion of the Olympic gods and the cult of the Homeric epic instantiate the Apollinian (BT 3), the Dionysian exists alongside in the folk songs and orgiastic festivals of the time (BT 2).

The second stage of Greek culture is initiated by the aesthetic invention of the tragic satyr-chorus: a recital of vivid dithyrambs by a large chorus before an audience. Nietzsche believes the tragic satyr-chorus to have emerged out of the Dionysian folk music of the prior era, but to have begun to adopt the character of the Apollinian in its reliance on image-laden language in the dithyramb (BT 4).

It is in the third stage, however, that the fusion of the Apollinian and Dionysian reaches its climax. This is the era of “Attic tragedy”. Nietzsche considers the era of Attic tragedy to be the greatest in all of Greek culture (BT 8, 9). In this stage of cultural development, Nietzsche extols the Greeks for harnessing and unifying the tremendous aesthetic power of the Dionysian and Apollinian drives. The tragic art produced by this unification is not merely an aesthetic feat. Much more importantly, the Greeks saw in their new-born tragedy a means of acknowledging, and embracing, the reality of suffering.

This is a crucial point for Nietzsche. Unlike his classicist predecessors, who had praised the Greeks primarily for the innocent “cheerfulness” [*Heiterkeit*] they supposedly embodied, Nietzsche admires the

⁷ In what follows, we will use the term “Dionysian” to refer to the German “*dionysisch*”, as the former is the term one finds most in the secondary literature on Nietzsche. The English translation used here translates the German as “Dionysiac”, however. The same goes for “*apollinisch*”. We use the term “Apollinian”, while the English translation renders this “Apolline”.

⁸ Following this schema, Nietzsche derives a score of characteristics associated with each drive. The Apollinian, being concerned first and foremost with images, gives rise to artforms like sculpture, painting, the plastic arts, and generally any image-laden forms of expression or interpretation in art. It seeks order, clarity, moderation and definiteness; it accentuates the created product as the central goal of artistic activity, and thus the individual as creator and patron of the artistic enterprise. The Dionysian, on the other hand, points to forms of artistic expression which lead past the creator/created and subject/object dichotomies and even past the bounds of individuality altogether. Here, artistic expression serves as a vehicle for experiencing the fundamental connectedness of human beings with each other and with nature. Dionysian art is enacted by an enraptured group in communal festivals, ceremonies and rituals, rather than created and patronized by individuals: “Here for the first time the jubilation of nature achieves expression as art, here for the first time the tearing-apart of the principium individuationis [principle of individuation] becomes an artistic phenomenon” (BT 2, pp. 20-21). Thus under the influence of the Dionysian, Nietzsche writes, “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (BT 1, p. 18; cf. BT 5, p. 33). The Dionysian is therefore characterized by the transcendence, release, sensuality and immediacy of experience that is achievable in such contexts.

Greeks because of their particular sensitivity to the “terrible truth” of the ineluctability of suffering (BT 7, p. 40). They “knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence” like no other people (BT 3, p. 23); the Hellene was “uniquely capable of the most exquisite and most severe suffering” (BT 7, p. 39; cf. BT 3, p. 24). Not only this: they possessed the cultural genius to provide a solution to it. The tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus elicited from their patrons a special type of aesthetic engagement which, instead of causing the audience to despair at the suffering depicted in the drama, instilled them with the courage to face it with resoluteness (BT 18). This was possible, Nietzsche argues, because Attic tragedy symbiotically couples the Dionysian and Apollinian drives within its dramaturgical content. Although tragedy presents its audience with a story of painful, heart-wrenching and unavoidable destruction, either of a beloved character or a cherished community, the audience is prevented from identifying with these characters as individuals and thus from lamenting their fate. In fact, the audience feels an elevated form of *delight* in beholding the images of tragic destruction (the Apollinian artifice) because of the influence of the Dionysian tragic chorus. The special symbolism employed in the tragic chorus—its poetical and august mode of expression and its direct addresses to the audience, for example—encourages patrons to identify with the choral body rather than the characters on stage. According to Nietzsche, “there was fundamentally no opposition between public and chorus” in tragic art (BT 8, p. 42); “the chorus is a living wall against the onslaught of reality because a truer, more real, more complete image of existence is presented by the chorus” (BT 8, p. 41). The individual audience member can thus experience the tragic fate of their beloved characters as a statement of the truth about his or her own eventual dissolution, and yet because this eventuality is something we invariably share with others, we can thereby feel a sense of togetherness and community. Summarizing the psychology of the tragic audience, Nietzsche concludes:

Dionysiac art . . . wants to convince us of the eternal lust and delight of existence. . . . We are to recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction; we are forced to gaze into the terrors of individual existence—and yet we are not to freeze in horror For brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being. . . . [W]e are pierced by the furious sting of these pains at the very moment when, as it were, we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac 70keptic, that this delight is indestructible and eternal. Despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one. (BT 17, pp. 80-81)

Thus, the unification of the Apollinian and Dionysian in Attic tragedy provides the audience with the very existential resources they need to affirm, rather than reject, the ineluctable sufferings of human life.

Unfortunately, the era of Attic tragedy did not last long on Nietzsche’s understanding of Greek aesthetic history. According to Nietzsche, Greek culture eventually entered into a fourth stage of development, thus beginning a final phase of slow but steady decline once Socrates began to take his infamous strolls through the forums of Athens (BT 12). Nietzsche’s main criticism of Socrates’ influence was his faith in the explanatory power of rational thinking, that the “depths of nature can be fathomed and that knowledge can heal all ills” (BT 17, p. 82). In particular, Nietzsche takes issue with Socrates’ optimistic belief that argument, inquiry, and dialectics could ultimately solve the problem of human suffering. In this optimism, Nietzsche sees a form of escapism that is absent from, and indeed is positively repudiated by, the Dionysian wisdom at the center of Attic tragedy. Jeffery Church (2006) puts this point

well. Nietzsche's central concern with Socrates' project was its attempt to *escape* suffering by reducing the world and all its tribulations to intellectual problems.

Socrates felt "obliged to correct existence" to make existence intelligible to the unaided reason of everyone. Socrates believed that reason could penetrate to the ground of things, that it can reach "down into the deepest abyss of being, and that it is capable, not simply of understanding existence, but even correcting it" so that one can even be liberated from the fear of suffering and death by making human mortality intelligible (p. 692, quotes from BT 13, 15).

For these reasons, Nietzsche considered "Socratic optimism" to be the direct opponent of the synthesis between the Dionysian and Apollinian that had been won in Attic tragedy, particularly in its attack on Dionysian wisdom.⁹ Nietzsche cites Euripides as the quintessential aesthetic acolyte of Socratic optimism. Euripides employed several aesthetic innovations in his tragedies: he shifted audience identification from the chorus to the *dramatis personae* (BT 11, p. 55f.), introduced an explanatory prologue in order to fully inform the audience of all necessary background knowledge, and made use of the *deus ex machina*, whereby a god would appear by means of a mechanical crane to save the tragic hero from some ill fate at the end of the tragedy (BT 12, p. 62f.). The advent of the latter two devices were particularly problematic, according to Nietzsche. In employing the explanatory prologue and the *deus ex machina*, Nietzsche believed Euripides was perfectly exemplifying Socratic optimism. With all relevant information provided in the prologue, the audience of Euripidean tragedy could feel, not tragic delight, but the pleasure of complete self-abandonment in the drama, watching the scenes unfold according to the dramatic logic already presented. At the same time, the *deus ex machina* ensured that all of the sufferings that occurred there would achieve a happy result with the return of the gods. Thus, crucially, Nietzsche argues that Euripidean tragedy offered its viewers a form of escape. Instead of facing the world's undeniable disappointments and disharmonies through the medium of the tragic chorus, the tragedy becomes a means for promising its viewers "earthly happiness" (BT 18, p. 86).

The advent of this "aesthetic Socratism" (BT 12, p. 62) meant the death of tragedy for the Greeks, according to Nietzsche. The sanguine intellectualism of Euripidean tragedy, and the Socratic worldview in general, negates the permanent reality of suffering and subordinates the pursuit of wisdom to the pursuit of knowledge (in the case of Socrates) and to safe artistic pleasures (in the case of Euripides). For Nietzsche, the project of providing a rational explanation of all the aspects of experience is ultimately *escapist* because it promises eternal relief from the terrible truth of suffering via rational explanation and pleasurable distraction. Yet in doing so, it forecloses the elevated delight one feels when united with others and with the natural world in Dionysian experience.

The Birth of Dionysian Pessimism: Nietzsche contra the Author of The Birth of Tragedy

Following this account of the rise of Socratic optimism, we are now much closer to being able to say what Nietzsche's opposed notion of Dionysian pessimism is. We have one element so far: it is patently

⁹ Nietzsche summarized Socratic optimism in three basic pillars: (1) Virtue is knowledge; (2) sin is committed only out of ignorance; and (3) the virtuous man is a happy man (BT 9). Nietzsche writes, "In these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy" (BT 9.).

non-escapist. It is an orientation to life that faces its struggles and sufferings head on. But this is not yet a fully satisfying conception of philosophical pessimism. As Soll (1988) points out, there are three dimensions to the pessimistic worldview. The first aspect captures the way the pessimist describes the world; this is the *descriptive aspect* of pessimism (p. 113). For the pessimist, human life is, quite simply, full of inescapable pain and suffering. The second aspect corresponds to the way life is *valued* in light of the prevalence of suffering. For example, one may despair at the thought of ineluctable suffering and therefore deem the value of life to be, on balance, negative. This is the *evaluative aspect* of pessimism. Finally, there is what Soll calls the *recommendatory aspect* of pessimism, or the way the pessimist recommends we *cope* with the suffering of life (p. 114). Following a valuation of life as negative, for example, one may withdraw from it as far as possible, attempting to escape the injustices that preponderate through art or some other medium.

In essence, the pessimism described in the paragraph above is the conception defended by Schopenhauer. As we have seen, this cannot be what Nietzsche means when he advances his Greek-inspired conception of pessimism; the affirmationism he praises in the Greeks is clearly in tension with Schopenhauer's worldview. Yet, determining *precisely* how Nietzsche's conception differs from that of Schopenhauer is complicated by a problematic idiosyncrasy of *The Birth of Tragedy* already mentioned above. Namely, while some of the basic elements of Nietzsche's alternative were already at work in the 1872 text, so were the categories and concepts of Schopenhauerian pessimism. This tension becomes particularly clear in the following passage:

Let us imagine a rising generation with this fearless gaze, with this heroic attraction to what is monstrous (*ungeheuer*), let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-killers, the proud recklessness with which they turn their backs on all the enfeebled doctrines of scientific optimism so that they may 'live resolutely', wholly and fully; would not the tragic man of this culture, given that he has given himself a self-education for seriousness and terror, be bound to desire a new form of art, the art of metaphysical solace [...] (BT 18, p. 88)¹⁰

When we examine the conception of pessimism operative in the passage, we are immediately struck with a dilemma. On the one hand, Nietzsche decries the "enfeebled doctrines of scientific optimism", recommending a "self-education for seriousness and terror" through which one learns to "live resolutely". This clearly refers to a kind of affirmative pessimism. But on the other hand, he characterizes tragic art at the end of the passage as offering a "metaphysical solace" [*metaphysischer Trost*], a term that suggests ultimate deliverance and escape from suffering. For the young Nietzsche, "metaphysical solace" is indeed what "we derive from every true tragedy" (BT 7, p. 39; BT 17, p. 84). It is this idea, which shows up regularly in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which especially incites the older Nietzsche, who in 1886 writes a new Preface condemning the latent romanticism of the work. In the passage below, the later Nietzsche is writing to the early Nietzsche, chastising him for his failures to live up to the anti-romantic ideal that he thought he espoused.

¹⁰ Translation amended at the line: "given that he has given himself a self-education for seriousness and terror" [*bei seiner Selbsterziehung zum Ernst und zum Schrecken*]. The translation renders this line, "given that he has trained himself for what is grave and terrifying," which does not do justice to the German syntax. For examinations of the German, we have consulted the *Kritische Studienausgabe* edited by Colli and Montinari (Nietzsche, 1967-1977) and the digital *Gesamtausgabe* from Nietzsche Source (Nietzsche, n.d.).

But, Sir, if *your* book is not Romanticism, what on earth is? . . . Just listen, Mr Pessimist and Deifier of Art, with a more attentive ear to a single passage from your own book, that not uneloquent dragon-killer passage which can sound enticing and seductive to young ears and hearts; . . . Is not your pessimist's book itself a piece of anti-Graecism and Romanticism, something which itself 'both intoxicates and befogs the mind', at any rate a narcotic, a piece of music even, of *German* music? Listen to this: . . .

would not the tragic man of this culture, given that he has trained himself for what is grave and terrifying, be bound to desire a new form of art, the art of metaphysical solace, in fact to desire tragedy as his very own Helen[?]

'Would it not be necessary?' No, three times no, you young Romantics; it should *not* be necessary! But it is very probable that it will *end* like this, that *you* will end like this, namely 'comforted', as it is written, despite all your training of yourselves for what is grave and terrifying, 'metaphysically comforted', ending, in short, as Romantics end, namely as *Christians* (BT P:7).

The later Nietzsche's admission that the book is anti-Hellenic is telling. It indicates that he now recognizes, conceptually at least, that the pessimism he hoped to derive from the Greeks—which he calls a "pessimism of strength" in the Preface (BT P:1) and "Dionysian pessimism" in *The Gay Science* (GS 370)—was distinct from the escapist pessimism of Schopenhauer. In other words, it is not that the Greek ideal which he promoted was faulty, but rather that his identification of it with Schopenhauer's longing for "metaphysical comfort" and escape was.

Herein lies the difference then between Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian pessimism. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer recommends precisely such an escapist orientation to suffering when he insists that we can escape the overbearing reality of suffering through aesthetic contemplation. For Schopenhauer, when we behold great art, we can shut out the incredible pressures of willing and forget, if only for a moment, the suffering of our insatiable desires. We become "so absorbed and lost in the perception" (Schopenhauer, 1969, § 34, p. 181) that we exist "only as a *pure*, will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*" (§ 34, p. 179), experiencing a brief "Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing" which "springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering" (§ 38, p. 196). While Schopenhauer wanted to use art to *escape* suffering, Nietzsche wanted tragic art to inspire the individual to meet it head on and to affirm life nonetheless. Nietzschean pessimism, properly practiced, should give the individual the strength to say "yes!" to life, come what may. Put differently, Nietzsche accepts the descriptive aspect of Schopenhauer's pessimism, but rejects its evaluative and recommendatory aspects. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche acknowledge the ineluctability and omnipresence of suffering in human life; this is a common theme throughout Nietzsche's corpus and a central point of his admiration of the Greeks in *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, Nietzsche does not want to draw the conclusion that the existence of suffering implies a negative value for life, from which we should therefore strive, as far as possible, to escape. Nietzsche castigates such escapism in his later works as evidence of what he calls "romantic pessimism" (BT, P:6-7; HH II:P:5-7; GS 370) and consistently promotes an affirmationist ethic. Importantly, the affirmation Nietzsche has in mind for the individual does not imply bearing life's challenges with one's teeth clenched. Rather, speaking directly to his readers in the Preface, Nietzsche exclaims: "No, . . . you should learn to *laugh*, my young friends, if you are really determined to remain pessimists" (BT P:7). His "life-affirming" pessimism implies a stance in which we can laugh and wonder at life with our mouths agape rather than our teeth clenched.

Thus, when the later Nietzsche somewhat confusingly claims that the author of the *Birth of Tragedy* is a “pessimist and art-deifier,” he is therefore referring to the escapist pessimism of Schopenhauer that asserted itself periodically within the text, not the “life-affirming pessimism” he had learned from the example of the Greeks. Summing up the matter in the 1886 Preface, Nietzsche argues that it is especially in their differences on the meaning of tragedy that the reader can distinguish between their existential outlooks:

I wonder if the reader understands which task I was already daring to undertake with this book? I now regret very much that I did not yet have the courage (or immodesty?) at that time to permit myself a *language of my very own* for such personal views and acts of daring, 74keptica instead to express strange and new evaluations in Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations, things which fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think about tragedy? This is what he says in *The World as Will and Representation*, II, p. 495: ‘What gives to everything tragic, whatever the form in which it appears, the characteristic tendency to the sublime, is the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and are therefore *not worth* our attachment to them. In this the tragic spirit consists; accordingly it leads to *resignation*.’ How differently Dionysos spoke to me! How alien to me at that time was precisely this whole philosophy of resignation! (BT P:6)

Here we have a clear admission that the central shortcoming of *The Birth of Tragedy* is not that it promoted pessimism and upheld the power of tragedy, but that it expressed the pessimistic ideal in ways that served an opposite ideal: escapist pessimism. While Nietzsche intended his Schopenhauerian and Kantian vocabulary to work in concert with his dramatic language to effect a self-education that would go beyond the escapism implicit in romantic pessimism, he merely recommended one escapist ideal in favor of another. He intends his rhetorical strategy to transform his readers into a life-affirming pessimist by being a “pied-piper . . . for young ears and hearts,” and thereby inspire them to resoluteness and confidence. Instead, his choice of words threatened to transform them into escapist “romantics and Christians.” His rhetoric was therefore in accord with the spirit, but not exactly the word of the life-affirming, Dionysian pessimism that the Attic Greeks embodied.¹¹

Educational Implications of Dionysian Pessimism: Nietzsche’s Critique of “Alexandrian” Education

With Nietzsche’s conception of Dionysian pessimism in place, we can now understand the full import of his critique of Socratic optimism in the *Birth of Tragedy* and the specifically educational consequences to be drawn from it. According to Nietzsche, the effects of Socratic optimism had rippled far beyond Greek society. As mentioned previously, Nietzsche believes that Socratic optimism had taken firm root in 19th

¹¹ Kaufmann (1974, pp. 124-134) and Church (2006) agree: The Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* was opposed to romanticism, even if “at some points [he] seems to endorse the view that tragic knowledge, ‘simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine’” (p. 697). For further evidence, see Nietzsche’s discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Ecce Homo*, in which he claims of his early work that, “I was the first to see the real opposition: the degenerating instinct that turns against life with subterranean vengefulness . . . versus a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, . . . even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence” (EH “The Birth of Tragedy” 2).

century German society, and he christens this curious cultural outgrowth with the (equally curious) term “Alexandrian culture”. For Nietzsche, Alexandrian culture genuflects to the power of Socratic dialectic: it “proposes as its ideal the *theoretical man*, equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge and laboring in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates” (BT 18, p. 86). The power of Socrates’ example had become so immense, according to Nietzsche, that it had even infiltrated the educational system of his day. He continues, “All our educational methods originally have this [Socratic] ideal in view: every other form of existence must struggle on laboriously beside it, as something tolerated, but not intended” (BT 18, p. 86). The ideal of Alexandrian culture is to educate individuals in dialectical thinking so that they can seek rational explanations for all phenomena in the world, including suffering. For Nietzsche, this is an education in escapism.

Nietzsche believes that the Alexandrian educational paradigm preaches escapism on two levels: an epistemic and an existential level. First, students under the influence of Alexandrian values are trained to see the world in purely scientific terms. Rather than accepting the reality of suffering, they learn to cope with it by generating *causal explanations* of how and why it has come about. In this way, they can suppress rather than face the anxiety that comes from the apparent randomness and meaninglessness of their suffering. For example, personal suffering is chalked up to “chemical imbalances” or “unhealthy habits”, each of which can be proactively treated and their debilitating effects reversed. The epistemic dimension of Alexandrian escapism leads directly to the existential dimension. Adherents of the Alexandrian paradigm are trained to believe that such causal explanations, if systematized into a body of scientific knowledge, enable the development of *technologies* that can eliminate their pain, or at least distract them enough to forget it. To continue the example from above, each of the sources of personal suffering can be mitigated by psychological treatment, medicinal intervention, or pain-killers. Nietzsche believes the consequences of this technological optimism to be especially troubling. Students enthralled by the promises of scientific knowledge begin to demand the technologies which promise to redeem them from suffering. And they become discouraged or resentful when their desired technology, their *deus ex machina*, ultimately fails to answer their prayers.

We should not now disguise from ourselves what lies hidden in the womb of this Socratic culture: an optimism which imagines itself to be limitless! We should not now take fright when the fruits of this optimism ripen, when the acid of this kind of culture trickles down to the very lowest levels of our society so that it gradually begins to tremble from burgeoning surges and desires, when the belief in the earthly happiness of all, when the belief that such a general culture of knowledge is possible, gradually transforms itself into *the menacing demand for such Alexandrian happiness* on earth, into the invocation of a Euripidean *deus ex machina*. (BT 18, p. 86; emphasis added)

The technological optimism at the heart of Alexandrian culture, Nietzsche presciently observes, provides a kind of metaphysical explanation for the preponderance of the consumerist lifestyle in the industrialized world, a lifestyle defined by its “menacing demand” for products and technologies that promise us final and lasting happiness. Nietzsche goes even further in this section, claiming that, in order to meet the ever-growing demand for palliative technologies, Alexandrian culture requires an ever-expanding and ever-exploited workforce. In a passage not dissimilar to something we might find in Marx, Nietzsche argues that since the demand for palliative technologies is ceaseless, the pauperization of the workforce will be so as well.

It should be noted that Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist in the long term; as it views existence optimistically, however, it denies the necessity of such a class and is therefore heading toward horrifying extinction when the effects of its fine words of seduction and pacification, such as ‘human dignity’ and ‘the dignity of labour’, are exhausted. (BT 18, pp. 86-87)

There is one final reason Nietzsche opposes Alexandrian culture. Namely, Nietzsche takes issue with the ideal of the educated person that Alexandrianism advances. Due to the influence of Socrates, Nietzsche believed that the German education system was more concerned with producing stodgy theoretical men and literary critics than it was with producing individuals who could see the existential import of the ideas and people they studied. The educated modern “remains eternally hungry, a ‘critic’ without desire or energy, an Alexandrian man who is basically a librarian and proof-reader, sacrificing his sight miserably to book-dust and errors” (BT 18, p. 88). Under the influence of Socratic dialectic, everything becomes an object of detached intellectual criticism. Nietzsche found this especially problematic in relation to the teaching of Hellenic studies in the 19th century German *Gymnasium*. Although Goethe and Schiller had insisted on a robust study of the Greeks in which the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual vigor of the Greeks would be emulated, German educators, who had all but completely imbibed the spirit of Socratic dialecticism, had come to settle for antiquarian and critical studies of Greek literature (BT 20). According to Nietzsche, students were not learning *from* the Greeks; they were simply learning *about* them.

This is why, since that time, we have seen a most worrying decline in judgments about the educational value of the Greeks. . . . Precisely in those circles whose dignity could consist in drawing inexhaustibly from the Greek stream to the benefit of German education, precisely the teachers in our institutions of higher education, have learned better than most how to reach a quick and comfortable accommodation with the Greeks, even to the extent of abandoning skeptically the Hellenic ideal and completely perverting the true aim of all classical studies. In those circles one either exhausts oneself in the attempt to become a reliable corrector of old texts or a natural historian studying language in microscopic detail, or one perhaps seeks to appropriate Greek antiquity, alongside other antiquities, ‘historically’, but at any rate adopting the method and the haughty demeanour of today’s cultured historiographers. (BT 20, p. 96)

For Nietzsche, the true purpose of classical studies is not to amass information on Greek culture but to *embody* it as an educational and cultural ideal; one finds this exhortation again and again in Nietzsche’s early works. In *Daybreak*, for example, Nietzsche laments of his classical education: “And the classics! Did we learn anything of that which these same ancients taught their young people? Did we learn to speak or write like they did? Did we practice unceasingly the fencing-art of conversation, dialectics? Did we learn to move as beautifully and proudly as they did, to wrestle, to throw, to box as they did?” (D 195). The classicists and their neo-humanistic educational program do not even approximate the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual rigor necessary to promote these exemplary human beings; they flatly negate such attempts as unscientific and unscholarly, *unwissenschaftlich*. Against this critical backdrop, Nietzsche implores his readers to radically reconceptualize what it means to be classically educated. He wants to divest classic education of its modern, antiquarian trappings and return it to the holistic form it held in Hellenic antiquity.

Nietzsche's Alternative: Mythopoesis, Life-Affirming Pessimism and the Doctrine of Self-Overcoming

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche outlines an alternative educational vision to replace the Alexandrianism in education he found so troubling. In order to establish his educational alternative to Alexandrianism, he challenges the Alexandrian, Socratic culture, surprisingly, on its own terms. Recall that the Socratic optimist characteristically attempts to explain all of the phenomena of experience by means of a comprehensive rational account. Nietzsche takes issue with this rationalist worldview for its claims to comprehensive knowledge and its attempt to cast the unmistakable reality of human suffering as just another problem to be solved by rational thinking. But rather than embracing a quasi-mystical embrace of the “great unknown” and thus abandoning the ideal of rational knowledge altogether, Nietzsche rearticulates the ideal in a way that incorporates the existential insight that he derives from the Attic Greeks. Against the hyper-rational conception of theoretical knowledge advanced by the Socratic worldview, Nietzsche offers an alternative of “embodied wisdom” that is sensitive to the value of all types of experience, including the experience of suffering. For Nietzsche, this kind of understanding must “take the place of science as the highest end” (BT 18, p. 87). It must be a “wisdom that . . . turns with unmoved eyes to a *comprehensive view* of the world” (BT 18, p. 87; emphasis added). By claiming that his view of the world is *more* comprehensive than the scientific one, he is not saying that the scientific view that descends from Socrates is patently false; he grants that it is true in important ways and even suggests replacing the Alexandrian-Socratic ideal of the “theoretical man” with the image of an “artistic” [*künstlerischen*] (BT 14, p. 71) or “music-making” [*musiktreibenden*] Socrates” (BT 15, p. 75, BT 17, p. 82). Rather, he believes that a truly comprehensive worldview must move beyond the I optimism found in the Alexandrian worldview. He hopes to shame the honest Alexandrian into recognizing that his or her worldview is *not* comprehensive because it does not embrace the existential dimension of the world that includes experiencing the reality and ineluctability of suffering. This “tragic knowledge” (BT 15, p. 75) or “Dionysian wisdom”, which formed the core of Attic Greek aesthetics, is denied by the scientific worldview.

Thus, Nietzsche's counterclaim to the Alexandrian is that only Dionysian, tragic wisdom can provide true comprehensiveness of understanding. Put differently, to be able to affirm life comprehensively, one cannot merely analyze it rationally; one must also be able to acknowledge and embrace the terrifying character of life, with its struggles, sufferings, disappointments, and losses. Yet, crucially, one cannot simply assert this “tragic knowledge” as one more proposition that obtains about the world. This would be to reduce tragic insight into the terms and methods of the theoretical paradigm. Rather, as we saw previously, the Attic Greeks *enacted* their Dionysian wisdom in the Apollinian imagery and dramaturgical framework provided by the tragic play. Without the mediation of the Apollinian, Dionysian insight leads either to licentious transgression, a “repulsive witches brew of sensuality and cruelty” which Nietzsche found in the early Dionysian festivals (BT 2, p. 21), or else to a deep despair and resignation in the face of life's horrors. Instead, a comprehensive affirmation of life requires, as the Attic Greeks knew, a *tragic mythology* through which the immensity of Dionysian wisdom can be transformed into a source of strength and inspiration. Against the rationalist worldview, Nietzsche thus proposes what might be called “mythopoetic” worldview.

What, then, is the educational vision implied by Nietzsche's mythopoetic worldview? As indicated above, Nietzsche believes that Greeks were able to confront and embrace their suffering precisely because they had a robust mythopoetic tradition that inspired them and infused them with existential strength. The tragedies this tradition produced invited the audience to participate in the sufferings of their heroes and to be strengthened by the heroes' responses to their sufferings. The Greeks were given models by which to live their lives, but not only models for admiration: they were models for emulation. Watching their heroes overcome their fear and weakness on stage gave the Greek individual the drive to overcome their fear and weakness outside of the theatre. Nietzsche argues that in the same way that the Greeks relied on mythological sustenance and guidance to be the best turned out people of all time, so too could the modern individual. The modern individual needs exemplars of his or her own from which to gain strength and wisdom. In particular, Nietzsche believes the modern individual needs *mythological* exemplars, since living exemplars have all but ceased to exist in the modern world, on Nietzsche's view. As he puts it in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, for example, "where are we, scholars and unscholarly, high placed and low, to find the moral exemplars and models among our contemporaries, the visible epitome of morality of our time?" (SE 2, p. 132).

It is precisely this need for mythological exemplars that was likely one of Nietzsche's central motivations for writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Reflecting on the meaning and importance of the work in his own corpus, Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*: "This work stands altogether apart. Leaving aside the poets: perhaps nothing has ever been done from an equal excess of strength. My concept of the 'Dionysian' here became a *supreme deed*" (EH "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" 6; cf. EH "The Birth of Tragedy" 4). *Zarathustra*, it seems, is intentionally written in a mythological vein so as to awaken the average German to take up a "self-education in seriousness and terror" (BT 18, p. 88) and to practice self-overcoming in the face of this terror. Zarathustra embodies life-affirming pessimism and routinely welcomes and embraces his own suffering as a way achieving his highest self.¹² Indeed, just after Nietzsche criticizes romantic pessimism in the Preface, Nietzsche quotes his own *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a counterexample to follow: "Lift up your hearts, my brothers, high, higher! And do not forget your legs! Lift up your legs, too, you fine dancers! . . . This crown of the laughing-one, this rosary-crown; to you, my brothers, I throw this crown! I have sanctified laughter; you higher men, *learn* to laugh, I beseech you!" (BT P:7; quote is from Z IV: "On the Higher Man")

A second, and equally important, aspect of Nietzsche's educational vision in the *Birth of Tragedy* derives from the significance it gives to suffering as the "subject matter", we might say, of aesthetic education. Indeed, the mythopoetic forms of expression it recommends are meant to help us confront

¹² On first glance this may seem dangerously close to the Romantic pessimism of Wagner, who argued that for Germans to become strong they would need an organizing mythology which would guide the nation into a glorious future of strength and unity. On closer inspection, however, the mythology of the Greeks that Nietzsche hopes to reinstate is fundamentally different from the mythology of Wagner. According to Nietzsche, the strength of the Greeks was not found in the strength of the Greek city-state as political and communal social institution. Rather it was found in the coincidence of powerful individuals, who taken together in aggregate were the most impressive people of all time. What Greek mythology did, therefore, was inspire individual Greeks to unite their Dionysian and Apollinian drives and become their highest, most courageous selves, not in service to the collective but in service to themselves. Wagner's mythology, however, was created not to make individuals strong, but to make the *Reich* strong. Individuals were supposed to experience a kind of ecstatic communality and solidarity while watching Wagner's folkloric operas. This solidarity was to provide the justification for the duties they would have to fulfill for the communal culture.

the ineluctable fact of human suffering and develop a robust, pessimistic stance towards it. This may seem to be either too bleak to be a serious educational proposal or, worse, a dangerous one. Regarding the first objection, it should be remembered that Nietzsche believes that the “pessimism” that underlies the mythopoetic worldview on offer is a life-affirming orientation to the world, one through which, as Nietzsche surprisingly puts it in the passage above, we finally learn how to “laugh”. The idea is that we will all face challenges in our lives, challenges that cause us emotional and physical suffering, and it is precisely in these moments that we require the strength of character to continue to grow and flourish, not in spite of, but because of them. We can garner this strength from the example of others who have persevered, in literature or in life, in similar moments. In this way, Nietzschean pessimism helps us to develop an orientation of global gratitude towards life, in which even misfortune is seen as an opportunity to draw out what is best in ourselves and others.

Regarding the second objection, Nietzsche’s call to embrace suffering does not amount to an affirmation of suffering for its own sake. Nietzsche does not expect us to forgo trips to the doctor, vaccinations and dental work as multifarious “palliative technologies” with which Alexandrian culture tempts us. Rather, when Nietzsche speaks of facing “our suffering”, he means to call our attention to a general aspect of the human condition, which, when confronted, can be elevating, empowering and ennobling rather than simply destructive or debilitating. Our desire to escape all forms of suffering can actually prevent us from flourishing; this is the core of Nietzsche’s insight. But this does not mean that *all* the suffering that we would take upon ourselves leads to flourishing. Nietzsche’s critique of asceticism in his late works speaks directly against this understanding of his “pessimistic” educational vision. Rather, Nietzsche’s educational vision calls for an orientation towards suffering *between* escapism and asceticism, in which we seek out only those forms of suffering that stem from “the overfullness of life” and thereby lead us to greater flourishing. As he puts it in a late work:

Every art, every philosophy, may be considered a remedy and aid in the service of either growing or declining life: it always presupposes suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *overfullness* of life and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life—and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy, calm, stillness, smooth seas, or, on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion, and anesthesia. Revenge against life itself—the most voluptuous kind of frenzy for those so impoverished! (NCW, “We Antipodes”)

What exactly does it mean to “suffer from the overfullness of life”, as Nietzsche recommends in this passage? Nietzsche’s answer in *The Birth of Tragedy* is a familiar one for those acquainted with his later works. Namely, the suffering that Nietzsche’s educational vision calls us to seek out is the suffering involved in *self-overcoming*.

For the fact that such tragic things really do happen in life would in no way explain the origins of a form of art, unless art did not simply imitate the reality of nature but rather supplied a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, *and was set alongside the latter as a way of overcoming it*. (BT 24, p. 113; emphasis added)

This early formulation of Nietzsche’s doctrine of self-overcoming is significant. Through tragic art and the mythopoetic worldview, Nietzsche claims that we can garner the strength to overcome the suffering of our natural passions and desires so that we can learn to suffer in a progressively higher sense,

thus avoiding the temptations of “Alexandrian” consumerism and palliative technology.¹³ Instead of despairing at the fact of ineluctable suffering, one learns to affirm life for all its painful and beautiful elements and resolve to live it powerfully. Importantly, this challenge to become self-overcomers is not an imperative to become isolated self-perfecters, but a call to unite ourselves in communities and friendships in which each person can inspire and be inspired by the group. As Nietzsche observes of Attic tragedy, appreciation of the Dionysian aspect of life causes us to experience a transcendence of the normal bounds of individuality and feel united in common cause with our fellow sufferers and self-overcomers (BT 1).

The Promise of Pessimism for Contemporary Education

With this outline of the educational vision in *The Birth of Tragedy* behind us, we can now turn our attention to its significance for contemporary education. It is our contention that contemporary schools are home to their own version of “Alexandrianism” and that the Alexandrian character of modern schooling leads to a modern version of escapism. This escapism manifests itself in the disengagement among students that has become widespread educational phenomenon.

As we mentioned in the Introduction, a troubling trend towards student disengagement and indifference has developed over the last few decades. While students often claim to understand the value of their educational experiences (OECD 2012), they are less and less motivated to put forth the effort this education requires. As Paul Trout (1997), in his article “Disengaged Students and the Decline of High Standards,” puts it:

[Students] do not read the assigned books, they avoid participating in class discussions, they expect high grades for mediocre work, they ask for fewer assignments, they complain about workloads, . . . they regard intellectual pursuits as “boring,” they resent the intrusion of course requirements on their time, they are apathetic or defeatist in the face of challenge, and they are largely indifferent to “anything resembling an intellectual life.” (pp. 47-48)

Holly Hassel and Jessica Lourey (2005) further this point in their study of motivation in college students: “[A]necdotal (as well as empirical evidence) demonstrates that more than ever, students expect to be catered to” (p. 2). Students do not expect to have to work hard or overcome obstacles in order to achieve their degrees: a college degree is purchased, not worked for. Klem and Connell (2004) explain that this phenomenon has been a mainstay of public school culture for decades, with studies now showing that nearly half of students in secondary schools are disengaged from their learning. Finally, Paul Zoch (2004) offers this grim picture in the preface of his book, *Doomed to Fail*:

Predictably enough, [students] learn very little and neither succeed nor meet their potential. They never learn the truth of the means of accomplishment and become passive spectators during their

¹³ Nietzsche believes that all human beings should be encouraged to become self-overcomers. This is the egalitarian, democratic dimension of Nietzsche’s educational vision, which is often mistakenly interpreted as “elitist” and only concerned with a select few “geniuses”. At the same time, Nietzsche believes that the educational system should contribute to the establishment of an “aesthetic aristocracy”. For an extended discussion of this complex position and a further explication of Nietzsche’s doctrine of self-overcoming, see Jonas and Yacek (2018).

education, which forms the basis of their adult lives. Many never learn the habit of doing what is necessary to succeed, much less the concept of overcoming their shortcomings or achieving excellence. (p. xvii)

While there may be a touch of alarmism in each of these accounts of student disengagement, they do seem to point to dramatic shortcomings in the administration, curriculum, teacher workforce, and culture of modern schools. While there is no doubt that there are important improvements that need to be made in each of these areas in order to provide a meaningful and inspiring education to all students, the Nietzschean perspective suggests that the source of the problem lies somewhat deeper. Recall that Nietzsche characterizes the Alexandrian individual as someone who has been taught to avoid his or her suffering, in particular by employing the tools of reason to promise oneself of its ephemerality or by grasping for the palliatives of technology and aesthetic self-abandonment. It is the former type of escapism, the *rationalization of educational suffering*, which the Nietzschean perspective suggests underlies student disengagement. Here while one may affirm both the value and unavoidability of struggle in the educational process, it is seen as a temporary means to a suffering-free end: a mere rite-of-passage whose completion promises final escape.

So how exactly is the suffering of education rationalized in contemporary schooling? There are three main ways, as we see it. First, as we saw in the Introduction, teachers and students have struck “bargains” to minimize each other’s frustrating antics. Within the context of such bargains, teachers implicitly send the message that if students would just apply themselves for the time being, they will be lead to the promised land of a good job and success in life, where money, free time, luxuries, sensational media, and exciting new technologies abound and suffering finally ceases. Instead of becoming enlivened and invigorated by such vague promises, however, students either trudge through their educations at the behest of their guardians, doing only just what is necessary to advance another educational rung, or else they move hastily through the tasks set before them with nervous conscientiousness and agitated ambition.

Second, educators have come under increasing pressure to prove the “relevance” of school curricula to policy makers and students. While “relevance” is no evil in itself, the ends which are most often enumerated as “relevant” are typically quite uninspired and uninspiring, such as job training, wealth, or financial security. For an example of this ideology, take, for instance, one of New Jersey’s Core Curriculum Content Standards: “Today’s students will be employed through much of the twenty-first century and will, therefore, need increasingly advanced levels of knowledge and skills. *To obtain and retain high-wage employment that provides job satisfaction*, they will also need to continue to learn throughout their lives” (Quoted in Weiner, 2003, p. 44; emphasis added). While this standard seems innocuous enough, it subtly advances the view that the reason to learn is to gain and retain high-wage employment. The implicit assumption seems to be that the reason high-wage employment provides job satisfaction is not because high wage jobs are fundamentally more satisfying (which is questionable, of course), but because high wage jobs provide the rewards of luxury, convenience, ready access to pleasure, and escape from struggle.

Third and finally, educators have increasingly been pressured to find ways of making curricula more stimulating to students, which has meant in many cases, merely making it simply more pleasurable. In the last few decades, this tactic has developed its own name and its own industry: *edutainment*. “The purpose of edutainment is to attract and hold the attention of the learners by engaging their emotions . . . [which] totally depends on an obsessive insistence that learning is inevitably ‘fun’” (Okan, 2003, p. 255). Of course, as with relevance, there is nothing inherently wrong with a lesson that is “fun” for students. The

problem lies in the two hidden assumptions of edutainment: (1) that education is fundamentally unpleasurable in the absence of the entertainment devices it recommends, and (2) that the pleasure experienced in education should be as accessible and immediate as that experienced in playing video games or watching popular films. The popular teaching guide, *Teach Like a Pirate*, by David Burgess (2012) serves as a particularly striking example of these assumptions. Burgess encourages teachers to combat the “soul-killing suckiness” (p. 55) of the typical school day by undertaking a “bar-raising paradigm shift” in their practice. This paradigm shift can be accomplished, Burgess suggests,

by attempting to blur the lines between education and entertainment. I stopped using the term ‘edutainment’ because it became a bit of a cliché, but I still believe it is a fairly accurate term for my classroom. My goal is to, at least sometimes, have students asking themselves, “Is this a lesson I walked into or a show?” When I’m presenting content, I attempt to draw on tried and true principles of staging and showmanship in order to turn my lesson into an event...an extravaganza. (p. 60)

Burgess implores teachers to ask themselves, “Do you have any lessons you could sell tickets for?” (p. 59). From a Nietzschean perspective, this is the opposite of what students need. By placing the satisfaction of pleasure front and center in education, edutainment becomes a vehicle for escaping the struggle found in learning. Increasing students’ access to pleasure in this way will only further reinforces a hunger to escape.¹⁴

The trouble with an educational system that rationalizes suffering in these three ways—that is, through bargains, pleas for relevance and edutainment—is that, like its Alexandrian counterpart, it fosters resignation and escapism. In doing so, not only does educational rationalization foster a kind of self-deception about human life which we are better off without, but it deceives us as to the goal of education. Instead of being inspired to take up the challenge of becoming one’s highest, most courageous, most disciplined, and most joyful self through the educational process, we come to see education as a necessary but undesirable obstacle to a more comfortable future. If students work hard and get good grades, they are taught, they will be rewarded with “good jobs,” which will buy them all the luxuries and conveniences they have been manipulated to desire.¹⁵ The Nietzschean perspective suggests that this will only lead to moral and spiritual fatigue. By focusing on the rewards, our educational system implicitly affirms pleasure as desirable and struggle as undesirable, which means learning is undesirable, as it is a struggle. To counteract this escapist posture, Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* suggests that learning should be thought of as an internal act, a deliberate decision on the part of the student to embrace the struggle found in learning, a struggle that when faced courageously engenders a sense of vitality and accomplishment.

If we put this educational insight somewhat differently, Nietzsche’s proposal can be shown to be continuous with an important recent development in motivation research in educational psychology:

¹⁴ In *The Labor of Learning: A Study of the Role of Pain in Learning*, Avi Mintz (2008) demonstrates the effects teachers’ attempts to protect students from suffering in the classroom, and the negative effects this has students’ motivation and self-concepts. Mintz outlines the tendency of American educators to “intervene at the first sign of struggle” (p. 72), and illuminates the ways doing so often undermines the short and long term educational progress in the students (cf. Mintz, 2017).

¹⁵ According to Rosenow (1973), Nietzsche observed the same phenomenon in his era: “The dissemination of general education is, in fact, economically motivated; education is considered to be a way of raising the standard of living of the masses and turn man into something which has ‘cash value.’ The purpose of education is, according to Nietzsche, to persuade men that therein lies their true happiness” (p. 357).

namely, that educational struggle is most effectively supported by intrinsic sources of motivation. Of course, there is an abundance of research indicating that students who are intrinsically motivated not only perform better in school, but are dramatically more engaged in their educational experiences. Compared with extrinsically motivated students, intrinsically motivated students are less likely to drop out of school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003), are more self-regulating (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990), have a higher sense of well-being (Levesque, Zuehlke, Stanek & Ryan, 2004), are more intellectually interested and engage more deeply in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and demonstrate fewer work-avoidance tactics (Thompson, 2004). The question is how to help students become intrinsically motivated. Carole Ames (1992) argues that best way to do this is to develop what are called “mastery goals,” whereby students are asked to master simple tasks, progressively working up to the mastery of a more complex task which has been determined to be educationally valuable. The important point here is the emphasis on mastery rather than performance. The emphasis on mastery focuses less on merely completing the task and more on the value of putting forth the effort to complete the task. “Mastery goals are associated with tendencies to define and evaluate competence relative to task demands or prior outcomes, to attribute outcomes to effort, to prefer challenging tasks, to construe difficulty as diagnostic of the need for further learning, and to respond to difficulty by seeking help and information that can support learning” (Butler, 2007). Ames suggests that mastery tasks may lead to broader implications for the development of students’ self-perceptions, instilling a sense of belonging and “a belief that one is an important and active participant in all aspects of the learning process” (Ames, 1992, p. 263). In addition, students must “perceive meaningful reasons for engaging in an activity . . . [like] improving their skills, or gaining new skills” (Ames, 1992, p. 263). According to Ames, teachers who develop a diverse array of mastery tasks for their students will increase their students’ chances of becoming intrinsically motivated.

Nietzsche would agree with all of this: that self-perception is tied up with the accomplishment of tasks, that motivation should be intrinsic, and that effort is essential to student motivation. He would agree that when educators attempt to motivate students by the practical relevance of the curriculum or make the curriculum easier or more entertaining, they fail to address what it is that students need and want: mastery. What Ames’ and others’ studies on mastery motivation rightly show is that students want to *engage* with the material, and not just as a means of escaping struggle in the future by getting good grades now. Students want to engage because they want to experience the power of mastery. Thus, to make the curriculum easier or more pleasurable is only to take away the students potential to become more powerful. Nietzsche’s formulation of a life-affirming pessimism in the *Birth of Tragedy* underscores this observation. The goal should be to help students become more powerful by encouraging them to accept, embrace, and find joy in the struggle of school and existence, not to avoid it or to promise oneself that one’s struggle now will eradicate future struggle. Facing the struggle of education in this way leads to what Nietzsche believes is the greatest form of mastery: mastery over one’s self.¹⁶

Beyond the significance of mastery motivation, however, the Nietzsche perspective suggests that student disengagement is a result, not only of pitfalls in our pedagogy but in a deeper, escapist, stance towards struggle in general. Thus, from this standpoint, a broader educational program will ultimately be

¹⁶ For Nietzsche, there are certain forms of mastery that are signs of weakness. The need to master others is a weakness; the need to get or do only what one wants is a weakness; the need to avoid all responsibility and challenge is a weakness. The form of mastery that is truly satisfying is the ability to overcome the above “needs” in favor of self-mastery: the ability to govern one’s desires and channel them into more powerful outlets.

required to meet the problem of disengagement. In particular, Nietzsche's educational vision in *The Birth of Tragedy* implies a transformed conception of the way teachers and administrators generally orient themselves to their students and curricula. We might call this the school ethos. If students ultimately desire power in the form of content mastery, the goal should not be to encourage them to do their work because of its practical relevance or the promise of eventual pleasure, but because it demands *self-overcoming*: the greatest form of mastery one can achieve. A culture of self-overcoming is the antithesis of the disguised, "Alexandrian" form of escapism which encourages individuals to consider pain and struggle to be undesirable and rationalization to be a safeguard against it. This widespread educational escapism leads to a disposition towards learning and experience that is rooted in fear and passivity. The school ethos should not be founded on the belief that education is a necessary but undesirable means to an end, the end being financial prosperity and its attendant luxuries. Instead, Nietzsche argues that it should reemphasize the intrinsic desire for self-overcoming championed by the comprehensive mythopoetic worldview. Education, if it is to have any value, should teach students

how much [they are] able to endure: distress, want, bad weather, sickness, toil, solitude. Fundamentally, [they] can cope with everything else, born as [they are] to a subterranean life of struggle; [they emerge] again and again into the light, [they experience] again and again [their] golden hour of victory—and then [they stand] forth as [they were] born, unbreakable, tensed, ready for new, even harder, remoter things, like a bow that distress only serves to draw tauter. (GM I:12)

In order to achieve this shift in the school ethos, students would need to be reaffirmed as agents in the most important sense: that is, reaffirmed in the recognition that there can be joy in struggle and mastery.¹⁷ But the only way to help them realize this is to refuse to ask them to be mercenary to their academic and economic futures, as we so often do in education.

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¹⁷ Interestingly, many students experience a kind of joy in the struggles when it comes to contests of prowess, like athletics, video games, art competitions, music recitals and so on. Why does it seem so hard to translate this affirmation of struggle into the classroom? Perhaps because contemporary "Alexandrian" culture is so ingrained that teachers themselves neglect or forget to frame their courses in terms of the potential joy found in academic struggle.

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